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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000694

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SA, SA/INS, SS/INS; NSC FOR E. MILLARD

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SUBJECT: In big defeat for new government, Sri Lankan Parliament elects Speaker from Opposition ranks

Refs: (A) Colombo-SA/INS telecon 04-22-04

- (B) Colombo 690, and previous

(U) Classified by James F. Entwistle, Deputy Chief of Mission. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: The Sri Lankan Parliament has elected W.J.M. Lokubandara, an MP for the Opposition UNP, as its next Speaker. The vote, which took place late April 22, was a close one, 110-109, with six abstentions. Parliament reconvenes on May 18. While the Speaker job is largely symbolic, the new government has lost significant face and will be on shaky ground if there is a vote of no confidence down the road. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) SPEAKER ELECTED (FINALLY): Late April 22, in a marathon, raucous all-day session, W.J.M. Lokubandara, a former minister from the Opposition United National Party (UNP) was elected Speaker of Sri Lanka's Parliament by a margin of one vote. The final result, which came after three rounds of voting, was 110 for Lokubandara and 109 for United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) candidate D.E.W. Gunasekera. (The "UPFA" is the technical term for the grouping of President Kumaratunga's Sri Lanka Freedom Party "SLFP," the radical Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna "JVP," and several small leftist parties. Gunasekera is a member of the Communist Party.) As reported in Ref B, the first round of voting ended in a 108-108 tie. The second vote was cancelled after several UPFA parliamentarians seized the ballot box midway through voting and prevented further votes from being cast. The third and decisive round of voting for the Speaker position proceeded largely without incident late on April 22, but hooting, hollering, and the throwing of papers and files erupted from the government side after the result of the voting was announced.

3. (C) LIKELY BREAKDOWN OF VOTES: The voting for the Speaker position was done via secret ballot, so determining the exact breakdown of the votes is difficult. That said, the UNP, which has 82 seats, appears to have garnered the support of the pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Tamil National Alliance (TNA) with its 21 seats (the TNA has 22 seats, but one of its MPs did not turn up), and the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) with its five. The UPFA (and its Tamil party ally, the EPDP) with its 106 seats appear to have voted with Gunasekera. Of the six abstentions, five of them apparently came from the Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) party, which has nine MPs, all of them Buddhist monks. Two of the JHU MPs are thought to have voted for the UPFA and, unexpectedly, two may have voted for Lokubandara.

4. (C) PARLIAMENT LEFT IN TURMOIL: Local press coverage of Parliament's opening highlighted the sensationalistic nature of the day's events. Media reports underscored the raucous and juvenile behavior of the MPs -- sitting on the ballot box to prevent voting, hurling insults at the Buddhist monk members (some UPFA MPs were angry that the JHU had not aligned itself with Gunasekera), hooting and jeering during other MPs' speeches. Memories of the sparring on April 22 seem likely to cast a shadow over future sessions of Parliament when it next meets on May 18. On May 18, members will proceed with selecting a "deputy speaker and chairman of committees" and a "deputy chairman of committees." While the UPFA has already proposed a candidate for each position, the UNP has not put forward any nominations at this point. (The UPFA's candidate for deputy speaker is Geethanjana Gunawardena, a UPFA "national list" MP, and the deputy chairman nominee is Muslim UPFA MP Segu Issadeen.) If no candidates are proposed to challenge the government's nominees, then Gunawardena and Issadeen will automatically assume the posts. In other possible moves down the line, the UNP could bring a no-confidence motion against the UPFA-led government. There has been no indication, as of yet, that such a motion is being put together at this point.

Contacts report, however, that it is a real possibility during upcoming sessions of Parliament, especially given the government's failure to elect its own nominee as Speaker. (A loss in a vote of no confidence would signal that the new government was about to collapse, but it could still linger on. Per parliamentary tradition and Sri Lanka's Constitution, a loss on a Budget presentation vote would lead to a collapse of the government, however, and would probably herald early elections. The budget vote takes usually takes place at a point late in the year.)

15. (C) COMMENT: While the Speaker job is largely symbolic, the new government has lost significant face in losing the vote for Speaker. It will certainly be on shaky ground if there is a vote of no confidence down the road. If the new government does survive, one major problem it could face in having Lokubandara as Speaker relates to President Kumaratunga's proposal that a "constituent assembly" be called to change the Constitution and restore a Westminster-type system with a strong prime minister. (Kumaratunga, who is term-limited as president, wants to stay in politics as PM if this happens.) Lokubandara could throw many procedural wrenches into these plans. In the meantime, it is not clear how the new government can regain the initiative in the near-term. Whatever "mandate" it had coming out of the April 2 election in which the UPFA performed very strongly, appears to have been frittered away in SLFP/JVP infighting and the defeat of its candidate for Speaker. In another ominous sign for the UPFA, New Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse tried to tamp down the disruptive behavior, but he could not gain control of his UPFA MPs. END COMMENT.

16. (C) BIO-DATA ON SPEAKER LOKUBANDARA: W.J.M. Lokubandara, 63, is an attorney-at-law. He is an honors graduate from the University of Peradeniya. He also earned a degree in the UK in Sanskrit. He was first elected to Parliament in 1977 as a United National Party (UNP) MP from Haputale in Uva District in southeastern Sri Lanka and has been in Parliament since that time. In the previous UNP government (2001-2004), he served as Minister of Buddhist Affairs and also as the Minister of Justice, Law Reform and National Integration. During that government, Lokubandara was considered to be a key link to the important Buddhist clergy. He is highly respected and a friendly interlocutor. He is Sinhalese Buddhist and is married. He speaks excellent English. END BIO-DATA.

17. (U) Minimize considered.

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